

12 January 1999

**Islam - A Personal Perspective**

Speaker: Dr. Barnett Rubin, Council on Foreign Relations, New York

Participants: Dr. Sami Musallam, Researcher; Ms. Allison Hodgkins, Academic Director, World Learning; Dr. Ishaq Al-Qutub, Sociologist; Dr. Mohammed Jadallah, Physician; Ms. Vanessa Kent, Planning & Development Department, PLC; Dr. Mustafa Abu Sway, Professor; Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi, Head of PASSIA; Ms. Deniz Altayli, PASSIA; Ms. Sawsan Baghdadi, PASSIA.

**Dr. Rubin:** I have been mainly involved with the question of Afghanistan, Pakistan and also India and Sri Lanka. My first direct contact with political Islam was through my research on the *jihad* in Afghanistan in the 1980s and my contacts with Afghani *mujahedin*, and through them with some people in Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran, who were not *ulama* but scholars.

Islam is undoubtedly part of a civilization, i.e. the Islamic civilization. Americans tend to think that a civilization is something that has clear boundaries and that exists within a state with clearly defined borders. I think it is a big mistake to say that Islam does this or that, or that Islam is that or that. I prefer to say 'Moslems' or 'believers in Islam' do one thing or another, that they are people who act with respect to their collectivity, who understand their symbols in a certain way, especially if they want to mobilize others with regard to certain issues, such as justice and power, etc. Certainly, if we look around at the Moslem World, we see that there are probably as many conflicts among different groups of Moslems as there are between Moslems and non-Moslems, and I do not think that we can say that Islam *per se* is what determines these conflicts, even if Islamic symbols were used in legitimizing the activities of the various groups.

There is no doubt that the West tends to link Islam to terrorism. The United States has witnessed a considerable amount of violence, some instigated by Moslems and some instigated by people who were trying to oppose Moslems, but I do not find it helpful to blame that violence on something called Islam. What I have tried to do instead is to understand the structure of societies where there are large numbers of Moslems, how people are put in situations where violence may be a rational choice or may use the banner of Islam to legitimize violence.

I should add that in Afghanistan everyone, whether on this side or that, is a Moslem. Moreover, they are not just Moslems but also Islamic, with everybody wanting an Islamic state and adherence to the *Shari'a*. I think that there are different interpretations of Islam, which vary according to different interests. In addition, when non-Moslems look at the culture from the outside, they tend to take a few basic facts and oversimplify without really understanding the complexities and the impact of something that has accumulated over several hundred or thousands of years.

There is no doubt that there are some factors that are modifying American perceptions of Islam. To begin with, the number of Moslems in America is growing very rapidly, and there are some very large Moslem communities whose members, in most cases, are

being integrated into American society. A lot of Moslems are becoming American citizens, which is something that politicians take into account.

I do not know much about Arab Americans, but I serve on a State Department advisory committee called the Secretary of State Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad. It has about 16 members, who represent different religious communities; I myself do not represent a community, but am there because of my experience in conflict resolution. The committee was established for several reasons, including as a response to the campaign by the Christian right in the United States to deal with the persecution of Christians in various countries, especially communist and Moslem countries, and essentially China and Sudan. We do not only deal with the persecution of Christians, but also with religious freedom in general. Two of the committee members are Moslems. One of the two Moslem members – who do not represent the Moslems in the United States - is Mohammed, an orthodox Black Sunni Moslem, and the other is a Palestinian obstetrician/gynecologist by the name of Leila Yassin, who is the head of a Moslem women's association. Both Mohammed and Leila, but especially Laila, play an important role in our discussions. Generally speaking, more and more Americans are dealing with Moslems on a day-to-day basis, which is a very positive thing. Religious Christians read something about Jews but nothing about Moslems in their religious texts, and for them, meeting and talking with Moslems can be very interesting.

#### **Discussion:**

**Question:** You mentioned that you have been to Iran. As an American, did you not meet with any problems?

**Dr. Rubin:** Do not forget that I am not only American, but also an American Jew. The Iranians knew that I was Jewish when they invited me, and although it was quite an issue at the Foreign Ministry – the people there were concerned about the more fanatical Iranians - I never encountered anything but friendship and cordiality.

I think that the situation is changing very rapidly; six months ago, the situation in Iran was much more open, whereas now it is growing extremely tense, with the more liberal progressive forces now in a very defensive situation and feeling very neglected. I was there in April 1994 and in January 1996, and more recently I have been involved in a joint project – a sort of dialogue - with Iranians, Europeans and Americans. We used to meet several times a year, but unfortunately, the Iranians have now stopped the project because they are afraid. I think that Iran is very interested in renewing relations with the United States and that the relations with the Palestinians and the Saudis are related to that. After the Wye Memorandum, the religious leader Khamenai' made a public statement in which he referred to Chairman Arafat as a miserable traitor, but not long afterwards President Khatami and Ayatollah Rafsanjani both offered their apologies to the Chairman.

**Comment:** Concerning Western views on Islam, I think that there is much more to be said on the subject, especially with regard to the way in which Islam and Moslems are

stereotyped in the West in general and the United States in particular. There are, of course, many cultural differences, and there have been many ups and downs in the American-Islamic relationship. I have seen many examples of the way in which Islam is portrayed in a very negative way in Western literature, whereas I have never seen it portrayed negatively in Arab literature. It is my belief that historical and cultural reasons are at the heart of this phenomenon.

**Dr. Rubin:** Obviously, there is certainly a lot more that could be said on the topic. As to how the images are transmitted, much of this is connected to politics.

**Question:** Could it also be related to the fact that the Islamic culture is spreading?

**Question:** Everybody is speaking about minority rights especially in Sudan, Egypt and of course Palestine. The Christians have lived in Palestine for hundreds of years, so why is it that all of a sudden everybody is talking about their rights?

**Dr. Rubin:** What happened in the United States is that various fundamentalist Christian sects who used to be very apolitical have become politicized in various ways and have become an important constituency for the Republican Party. Until recently, they had no international programs, except when it came to the issue of abortion, but approximately two years ago, they started raising the issue of the persecution of Christians. I would imagine that the reason behind this was the fact that politicians who heard the missionaries speaking in church about what they had seen and heard took the issue up, realizing that it was something that they could use against 'the other side'. The issue itself was not brought up by the State Department – especially since the end of the Cold War, there is no overriding large strategic objective – and the way in which it gained momentum is undoubtedly connected to the way in which constituencies can affect American politics. There is the pro-Armenia lobby, the pro-Greece lobby, the pro-Albania lobby, and the pro-Israel lobby, amongst others, and bearing in mind that the 'pro-Christian' group is potentially much larger than any other group, it has been relatively successful in pushing its agenda forward.

With regard to Sudan, I have never been there and I am by no means an expert on the topic, but my understanding of the situation today is that although religion is certainly a factor in what is happening there, it is much more a case of a very deep conflict that was started by colonialism. One has to remember also that there had been a secessionist war in the South for many years before religion became an explicit issue. Then, because of certain political developments in the Arab World, religion became much more politicized. I argued within the commission that if we look at a conflict, we should not try and emphasize the religious factor because people are using religion in order to make their political and economic interests seem holy, and that maybe what we should try to do instead is to determine if these people are using religion for political purposes and if the conflict has political origins.

**Question:** I would like to hear more about the alleged Moslem persecution of Christians here. What about American fundamentalist Christians who are raising the issue of Christian prosecution: the Christian Zionists?

**Dr. Rubin:** The committee has been meeting for two years, and we have heard all kinds of testimonies - we have heard from Palestinian Christians, Iranian Bahais, Egyptian Copts, Moslems from South Sudan, the American Moslem Council, Kashmiris, etc. I am unable to remember all the various groups that we have heard from, but I am sure that we have not heard a single mention of the Palestinian Christians in the past two years. It is certainly true that American fundamentalist Christians are an important constituency for the Likud.

**Comment:** I have noticed that whereas in the past the State Department was focusing on minorities such as the Jewish minority in Syria, there is now a lot more discussion about the Christian minority in the Arab World and how it is treated in terms of churches, holy places, individual property, positions, and relations with the authorities and the general non-Christian majority.

**Dr. Rubin:** In some predominantly Moslem countries, Christians do have problems; the Coptic Christians in Egypt, for example, have plenty of problems, but these do not stem directly from the government. There are inter-community problems that are connected to the social problems in certain parts of Egypt, and the Copts feel that they are not receiving enough attention from the government. However, the Coptic Patriarchate is extremely upset about the campaign against the Government of Egypt being waged by some of the Copts living in exile in the United States and has said that although it needs support, it should not take the form of an aggressive campaign, which they believe to be counterproductive. The reason why the campaign is becoming important is that there is now a political constituency that is making use of this particular issue. Again, it is not primarily a religious war, and there are many other issues involved, but the perception of it as a religious war has been strengthened by a political constituency that is very influential. Basically, it is a part of the campaign of the Republican Party to find issues to discredit the Democrats.

**Question:** In the old days, there were Palestinians and Jordanians who would go to Afghanistan and become *mujahedin*. Is there a connection between the Islamic movement here in Palestine and that in Afghanistan?

**Dr. Rubin:** I have an article with me written by Martin Hubley from King's College, London that you might find interesting. The article is called, 'Arab Afghans and Islamist Movements – A Unifying Factor?'

There were certain Arab leaders from the Gulf who played a very important role in transporting the weapons of the *mujahedin*, who were finding it difficult to obtain supplies. It was these Arab leaders who funded the transporting of weapons into Afghanistan, especially with the help of the Saudi and Kuwaiti Red Crescent, which had offices in the areas to which the weapons were transferred. They gave different

amounts to different parties, mostly to moderate parties, with the nationalists and fundamentalists not receiving that much, which is why the Islamic party is stronger in northern Afghanistan. It was the religion that pushed the Arabs to help them, believing, as they tend to do that *jihad* is an individual responsibility of every Moslem, and not only the collective responsibility of the *Uma*, to be fulfilled by the Islamic states. Two of the individuals who were involved in organizing all this were of course Osama Ben Laden and Sheikh Abdallah Azzam, who was a Palestinian from outside, and they worked together for a while before there was some kind of split. There were different non-Afghani Moslems – not just Arabs – who were fighting in Afghanistan; some were there because they were politically involved in Islamic movements at home and wanted to train, and there were those who were there because they saw engaging in *jihad* as a religious obligation. As time went on, there were more people in the second category than there were in the first, especially after the withdrawal of the Soviet troops; after the withdrawal, many of the Afghani *mujahedin* believed that the *jihad* was over.

I would say that Afghanis *per se* are still not really considered terrorists, the reason being that Afghanis have not been involved in any of the violent incidents outside Afghanistan. Concerning Osama Ben Laden, he left Afghanistan, as far as I know, in 1991, when he went to Sudan at the time of the Sudan-Iran rapprochement. Then, in 1994, the negotiations between the US and Sudan resulted in his being expelled from Sudan, from where he went to Afghanistan. How did he get there? That is actually a very good question, because he is certainly not the type of person who can travel around the world without being noticed. What he did was to go through Pakistan: basically, the deal they made was that Osama Ben Laden would be escorted into Afghanistan by the Pakistani intelligence services in return for the settling up of camps to train fighters from Kashmir. It was actually Kashmiri fighters who were the ones killed by the American missiles. So, Osama Ben Laden was in Jalal Abad, and he had a camp in the mountains, which was founded by a Pakistani construction company that was paid with Saudi money. The Taliban needed money and Osama started immediately paying the salaries of the people working with them. What this means basically is that first of all Osama Ben Laden is a *mujahed*, a *mouhajer* and an *ansar*, and then in addition to that, in terms of the Pashtun culture, he has taken refuge. Now when it comes to the Pashtun culture, it is a matter of honor to protect someone who takes refuge, even if he is not is a *mouhajer*, or a *mujahed* and *ansar*. Of course, he is also supplying the Pashtuns with technical assistance, which is very important considering that they are so isolated from the rest of the world.